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**THE NEW JERSEY**  
**ITALIAN AND ITALIAN AMERICAN HERITAGE**  
**COMMISSION**

PILOT CURRICULUM PROGRAM 2004-2005

*Italian Heritage Curriculum: "The Universality of Italian Heritage"*



## Unit Two - Immigration & Prejudice

### "Darwinism and Anti-Italian Sentiment"

**Purpose:**

Students will be able to:

1. describe how people once used Darwinian evolution to advance the notion of racial and ethnic superiority.
2. identify how the racist propaganda of these authors and others contributed to the Immigration Acts of 1917, 1921, 1924 and 1929 and resulted in discrimination against Italian Americans and other ethnic groups.
3. research and convey cogent examples in American history where Italian Americans made meritorious contributions to American society.

**Lesson Theme**

During the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many Americans used Charles Darwin's theory of evolution to justify their belief in the "racial superiority" of white Americans, especially those Americans of Anglo-Saxon stock. Darwin taught about "the survival of the fittest" in nature. Nature chose only the fittest animals to reproduce; thus, superior genes would pass on. Inferior genes would die out.

Certain scientists and scholars taught that there were superior races like there were superior breeds of dogs and horses. Of course, they usually noted that their own race was superior. They promoted the idea that Anglo-Saxons in Britain and the even "more advanced" Anglo-Saxon Americans would and should rule the world because they were of premium stock. They pointed to the large, wealthy British Empire as their proof, and politically free and wealthy child of Britain, the United States as further evidence. These racial Darwinists not only believed that the white or Caucasian race was genetically superior to nonwhite races, they taught that some branches of the white race were superior and other branches were inferior, especially those of darker complexion. Scientists even outlined hierarchies of levels of superiority for high school and college textbooks, with the Anglo-Saxons and Nordics on the top.

Below are three examples of this type of belief. These men were frightened that a multitude of Italians, particularly swarthy southern Italians, would come to the United States and dilute the "superior" Anglo-American gene pool. Some also worried that Italians would mix with African Americans and create a "fiery" generation who would not stand for a second-class status in America

**Classroom activities**

- I. Have students read the three excerpts on the worksheet.
- II. Have students point out where the authors presented misinterpretations and erroneous explanations of Darwin's theory of evolution.
  - A. Have students list reasons why this theory is so wrongfully applied to races.
  - B. Have students list modern and historical examples that will easily refute these arguments.

*Students could point out that both an Italian American and an African American sit on the United States Supreme Court.*
  - C. Instruct students to write a persuasive paragraph using their research to refute the use of Darwin's Theory of Evolution to support racial supremacy.

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- I. Ask students why writings and beliefs espoused in these excerpts helped cause the Immigration Acts of 1917, 1921, 1924, and 1929 to be enacted?
  - Have students create a graphic organizer chart.
    - They will list reasons the authors used to argue against immigration.
- II. Have students research 5 Italian Americans who made great contributions to American society.
  - A. Ask students to refute each point in their graphic chart, by using examples of praiseworthy Italian American accomplishments.
  - B. Ask students to write an open letter from the future to these authors.
    - 1. Instruct students to not be uncivil in their responses.
    - 2. Tell them to use reasoned arguments and give factual evidence in their letters to refute the authors' arguments.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## "Darwinism and Anti-Italian Sentiment"

### Excerpt One

In a 1912 article in the *North American Review*, Prescott F. Hall of the Immigration Restriction League wrote that immigrants brought with them "... political and social institutions very different from ours [Americans]. The Southern Italian, which constitutes the largest element in our present immigration, is one of the most mixed races in Europe and is partly African, owing to the Negroid migration from Carthage

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[who were really Semitic Phoenicians] to Italy. . . . The Negro strain in the South Italians has already been mentioned . . . What would happen if a large Mediterranean [Italian] population should be colonized in our Southern States and should inbreed with the Negro population it finds there? This is not an imaginary possibility, for the dark-skinned races are more likely to settle in the southern part of the country. . . . Let us suppose that some inbreeding with the Negro takes place. Will the descendants of the emotional, fiery Italians submit to the social judgment that a man with a sixteenth or a thirty-second part of Negro blood is a colored man who must occupy a position socially, if not politically inferior.

#### Excerpt Two

In 1916 Madison Grant, author of *The Passing of a Great Race* told his readers the highly evolved American people would become a diluted race, once new immigrants came into the United States and started to intermarry with Americans. He claimed that European leaders had taken the “. . . opportunity to unload upon careless, wealthy, and hospitable America the sweepings of their jails and asylums. The result was that the new immigration . . . contained a large and increasing number of the weak, the broken and the mentally crippled of all races drawn from the lowest stratum of the Mediterranean [southern Italy and Sicily] basin. . . . These immigrants adopt the language of the native [born] American, they wear his clothes, they steal his name and they are beginning to take his woman, but they seldom adopt his religion [Protestant Christianity] or understand his ideals.”

#### Excerpt Three

In a 1920 book, *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy*, Lothrop Stoddard warned against allowing immigrants into the country. He divided the White Race into three branches, the Nordic (blonde, blue-eyed English and Northern Germanics) the Alpines (stocky, brown-haired Austrian Germans, Swiss, etc.) and the Mediterranean (Southern Italians and Sicilians). He ranked the Mediterraneans as the most inferior branch of the White Race and warned against allowing them and immigrants of color into the United States. He worried that Mediterraneans would mix with Americans and, “Hence, when a highly specialized stock (superior white branches) interbreeds with a different stock (lower white branches or with people of color), the newer less stable, specialized characters are bred out, the variation, no matter how great its potential value to human evolution, being *irretrievably lost* [author’s emphasis].